

H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 174

David F. Hult, ed. and trans., *Christine de Pizan et al. Debate of the Romance of the Rose*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2010. xxviii + 286 pp. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-67012-0 (cl), 0-226-67013-9 (pb).

Review by Rosalind Brown-Grant, University of Leeds

The fact that there are still over 300 manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose* in existence, more than for any other French medieval work, is just one indication of the centrality of this text to the intellectual and literary life of late medieval France. The *Rose* is actually made up of two different parts.[1] The first 4,000 lines of the poem consist of a dream-vision by Guillaume de Lorris, probably written in the 1230s, in which the narrator, the Lover, falls in love with a rose. His quest for the Rose is aided and abetted by various allegorical personifications (Fair Welcoming, Shame and so on). The original poem ends unfinished, with the Rose locked away in a tower by Jealousy to prevent the Lover from obtaining her. The work was only completed some forty years later when the scholastic Jean de Meun added a further 17,000 lines which included lengthy digressions by characters such as Genius, Nature and Reason about topics such as the role of fortune in human life, the evils of women, and the hypocrisy of the mendicant friars. The work ends with the Lover attaining the Rose, “plucking” the rosebud in a scene full of obvious sexual innuendo.

Modern literary critics have interpreted the *Rose* in many different ways, but scholars have been particularly divided between those who see the poem as being monologically moralising and didactic (Jean de Meun was, after all, responsible for a translation into Old French of *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius (c. 524), a central work of medieval Christian stoicism) and those who believe that its multiple, conflicting voices create a more open-ended or “dialogic” text in which the author’s own opinions and intended meanings are elusive, leaving readers to arrive at their own conclusion about its morality. Such disagreements among modern scholars inevitably raise the issue of “validity in interpretation”, i.e., of whether we have rational grounds for preferring one literary interpretation to another, thus allowing us to arrive at the consensus which most academic disciplines regard as the basis of intellectual progress, or whether we should accept that there are as many valid readings of a text as there are readers of it.

If agreeing on the meaning of any work of imaginative literature is always tricky, this task would seem especially difficult when, as in the case of the *Rose*, we are confronted with a text from so many centuries ago, one that was the product of a society whose philosophical beliefs, moral attitudes and literary conventions and expectations were very different from those of our own day. What is particularly interesting about the *Rose*, however, is how, even within the late medieval period itself, the poem became the subject of a heated debate among writers and intellectuals about its meaning and moral significance, a debate which anticipated many modern discussions about the extent to which we can agree on authorial intention and the extent to which writers can be held responsible for the views expressed by characters within their work.

This “querelle de la Rose” began with a treatise by the early humanist scholar, cleric and royal secretary Jean de Montreuil, which unfortunately no longer survives but which, as its author tells us in a letter to his fellow cleric Pierre d’Ailly from May 1401 (pp. 49-50), enthusiastically praised the genius of the “author” of the *Rose*. Jean’s defence of the work

against its critics then drew a reply in mid-1401 from Christine de Pizan, France's first professional woman of letters. She is probably best-known to modern readers for her *Livre de la Cité des Dames*, which provides a comprehensive defence of the virtue and rationality of women against the misogyny which she saw as characteristic of the philosophy and poetry of her day.^[3] In this reply to Jean de Montreuil, Christine attacked the *Rose* for its misogyny in defaming and condemning "without exception an entire sex" (p. 63) but also objected to its indecency, immorality, blasphemy and obscenity.

Over the next year and a half, Christine's criticisms attracted opposition and support from a number of other writers. On the one side, Jean de Montreuil argued that while Christine was "not lacking in intelligence within the limits of her female capacity" (p. 103), she had failed to understand Jean de Meun's satirical intent in writing the *Rose*. This defence of the text was subsequently backed by Pierre and Gontier Col, friends of Montreuil who were also clerics and important figures in the royal chancellery. Pierre Col, for instance, argued that the *Rose* should be read as a satire in which foolish love was criticised and Reason was praised, maintaining that those parts of the text which seemed to promote sin could be understood ironically once they were read in their context and in terms of the "intention of the author" (p. 143).

On the other side, Jean Gerson, one of the most eminent theologians of the time, wrote his own treatise attacking the *Rose* as wicked, anti-religious, obscene, blasphemous and even heretical. He argued that when authors included the evil words of fictional characters in their works, they had a responsibility to the reader to make clear their own distance from and condemnation of the immoral views which were expressed therein. This formal debate about the *Rose* which took place in 1401-1402 was, however, only one episode in the much longer history of the reception of this text. As early as 1399, Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* had attacked the *Rose* for its immorality and misogyny while she, Gerson and Jean de Montreuil continued to criticise and defend the work even after what we now see as the "querelle" was over, with Christine's *Cité des Dames* (1405) explicitly citing Jean de Meun as one of the misogynist and misogamous authorities against whom women needed to be defended.

Given the centrality of Christine de Pizan in the debate about the *Rose* and the importance of misogyny among the criticisms which she and Gerson made of Jean de Meun's work, the "querelle de la *Rose*" was obviously a prime candidate for inclusion in the University of Chicago's excellent "Other Voices" series, edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr. The series seeks to make available in translation works from the period 1300-1700 when, its editors argue, the nature of women became the subject of explicit debate—including by female writers themselves—and when traditional negative views about women began to be challenged. In fact, as Alcuin Blamires has stressed, there was a pre-existing medieval tradition of defending women which writers such as Christine de Pizan could call upon, one which can be traced back to the late eleventh century and which particularly took off from the thirteenth century, even if the late fourteenth century did see "a vogue for structuring both misogynous and pro-feminine discourse into a dramatized situation and for complicating its effect by problematizing the nature of the persona who utters it."^[4]

Although some of the contributions to the "querelle de la *Rose*" were gathered together at the time, most notably by Christine de Pizan herself, what we now see as the "querelle" was, as David F. Hult makes clear in his useful introduction to this new edition of the texts, "never conceived of by contemporaries as a single event," and the writings that make it up were never, within the medieval period itself, "collected together in any single place" (p. 20). As a result, the editors of each version of the "querelle" since its first publication by F. Beck in 1888 have had to choose exactly which documents to include, to settle on the chronological order of their composition, and to decide how they should be presented for the modern audience.

Readers in the English-speaking world currently have four editions on offer to them. First, there is the invaluable edition of the texts in the original Middle French and Latin (with the Latin translated into modern French) which was edited by Eric Hicks in 1977.[5] This version is based on three main manuscript sources for the debate which it presents in their original order along with extracts from Gerson's sermons and Christine's *Cité des Dames* which refer to the *Rose*. Then, there is the translation into English of twenty-two documents relating to the "querelle" (as well as an extract from Christine's *Epistre au dieu d'Amours*) which was produced by Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane in 1978.[6] Third, there is the anthology of sources edited by Christine McWebb in 2007 which provides the texts of eighteen documents from the "querelle" and its immediate aftermath, which are printed in both their original Latin and Middle French and in a modern English translation, to which are added excerpts from Christine's later writings relating to the *Rose* and from Laurent de Premierfait's French translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*. [7] This anthology is particularly useful in making available a number of sources relating to the fourteenth-century reception of the *Rose* which pre-date the "querelle" as we now think of it, including the praise of the *Rose* for its beauty and wisdom by Gilles li Muisis (d. 1353), the Benedictine abbot of Saint-Martin de Tournai.

Finally, in this most recent translation of the "querelle" into English, David F. Hult provides twenty-six documents from the debate and its immediate aftermath, including Pierre d'Ailly's re-writing of the *Rose* as a pious, allegorical sermon about the "real God of Love" (p. 71), and also offers extracts in translation from Christine de Pizan's earlier and later writings which relate to the *Rose*. If Hicks's critical edition is indispensable for experts in the field, Hult's edition, in being the most comprehensive of the three translated versions, is probably the most useful for student readers, particularly those whose main interest is in medieval history and the history of ideas rather than the history of the French language. Students and non-expert readers will also welcome the decision to print the texts in their chronological order rather than, as in the Hicks edition, presenting them in the order in which they appear in the manuscripts, since this clarifies the development and interaction of the positions adopted by the contributors to the debate. After an introduction to the "Other Voices" series by its editors, Hult provides a brief but valuable introduction to the life and times of Christine de Pizan and explains the complicated history of the debate and of the various manuscript versions in which it has survived. There is a helpful bibliography of works on Christine and the "querelle," and each text has an introduction or lengthy notes which explain the nature of the source, its meaning and the problems of interpreting it.

Given that this volume appears in the "Other Voices" series, the focus in the introduction on the life and work of Christine de Pizan was inevitable but, in fact, Christine is probably the most familiar of the contributors to the "querelle." It would perhaps also have been useful to have more information about the lives and philosophical background of the other contributors, such as Gerson and Jean de Montreuil. Furthermore, while the introduction focuses on "Christine de Pizan's world" in terms of contemporary events such as the Hundred Years War and the Great Schism, modern readers might have benefited from further guidance on the more immediate intellectual context in which the "querelle" took place. In particular, an understanding of the debate about the *Rose* requires some knowledge of the literary theory of the day, of how it conceived of the purposes of literature and what it had to say about genre, allegory, satire, authorial voice and the responsibility of authors for the views expressed within their works. The volume usefully includes an index of people, places and characters, but, given the complexity of the themes and ideas that arose within the debate, a subject index might also have been useful for student readers.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, what the "querelle" demonstrates above all is the inconclusive nature of arguments about the meaning of literary works and the inability of those with conflicting views about a text to arrive at an agreed interpretation of its meaning or significance. As Christine de Pizan herself eventually concluded about her disagreement with Pierre Col: "I don't know why we are debating these questions at such length, for I

believe that neither you nor I have any desire to alter our opinions” (p. 188). Nevertheless, if the medieval debate about the *Rose*, like that among modern scholars, was left unresolved, this is an extremely valuable and scholarly version of one of the most fascinating episodes in the literary life of the later middle ages. Students, medievalists, general readers and all those with an interest in the history of literary theory will learn much from the documents of the “querelle” and, inevitably, will compare the views about the meaning of the *Rose* that were developed by the contributors to the medieval debate with their own readings of this endlessly re-interpreted work.

NOTES

[1] Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992).

[2] For the Bakhtinian distinction between monologic and dialogic texts, see Stephen H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 19-24.

[3] For Christine’s defence of women, see Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 19, 21, 33.

[5] Eric Hicks, ed., *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1977).

[6] Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane, eds, *La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in the Romance Language and Literatures, 1978) and Christine McWebb, ed., *Debating the Roman de la Rose: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Rosalind Brown-Grant
University of Leeds
r.brown-grant@leeds.ac.uk

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172

